



Chapter 6 Maintaining Good Customer Service

This chapter of the Toolkit discusses some of the ways an organization can keep its customer service program effective and viable.

Maintaining an effective and viable customer service program requires you to pay attention to several factors. You can't achieve good customer service by implementing a one-time initiative. It requires you to institutionalize the basic tenets and values of customer service throughout your organization — and to regularly reinforce them. Some of the key elements that we recommend:

- ❑ **Establish a customer-driven organizational culture.** Make sure that the benefits of customer service are understood and appreciated throughout your organization, that all staff feel empowered to practice and improve customer service, and that customer service accountability, recognition, and award systems are in place. Your organization should have a customer-oriented mission, vision, and organizational values. Your organization's commitment needs to be visible and obvious to your staff. You can accomplish this through: posters, placing customer service on meeting agenda, regular LAN or e-mail messages, etc. You may need to assess staff attitudes and assumptions about customer service within your organization and appropriate corrective steps.
- ❑ **Maintain management support and commitment.** Management must commit the necessary resources to customer service. The organization's strategic planning documents, such as a permit program's annual operating plan, should reflect a commitment to customer service. Your organization's policies and practices should be flexible, adoptive and resilient.
- ❑ **Know the processes and tools of customer service.** Managers and staff need the skills to implement customer service programs and maintain/improve customer satisfaction. Below is a *service skills matrix* developed by and included here with the permission of, Macro International, Inc. of Calverton, Md., to define the desired skills.

Training programs can help your staff understand why customer service is important and how to achieve customer satisfaction in your organization. A major telecommunications company has reported that customer satisfaction rose from 75 percent to 93 percent after its staff received customer service training. EPA has developed a training program that includes a 2-1/2 hour introductory workshop and six additional modules tailored to specific situations. EPA staff are conducting these workshops around the country. The introductory workshop, entitled “Forging the Links,” encourages participants to unleash their creativity to enhance EPA customer service. The six additional modules are entitled: “The Leader in Each of Us;” “Moving From Conflict to Collaboration;” “Proactive Listening;” “Clarifying Customer Expectations;” “Resolving Customer Dissatisfaction;” and “Influencing for Win-Win Outcomes.” These modules help EPA staff develop and use the personal skills they need to provide outstanding customer service. You can obtain more information on this training by contacting Patricia Bonner at EPA Headquarters, telephone number (202) 260-0599.

- ❑ **Establish accountability for customer satisfaction.** Managers and staff need to understand and be held accountable for implementing customer service programs. The most direct way to accomplish this is through performance standards and performance appraisals.
- ❑ **Keep in touch with your customers.** Regularly request, evaluate, and respond to your customers’ needs. This means obtaining feedback through any of the approaches described earlier in this toolkit. Respond as appropriate and keep them informed of improvements designed to meet their needs. A Web page or newsletter are excellent vehicles to reach your customers with such information.
- ❑ **Institute appropriate incentives, particularly recognition and/or award programs.** Staff excellence in customer service needs to be promoted, recognized, and reinforced. Incentives can range from letters of appreciation to cash award programs. We recommend the book, *1001 Ways to Reward Employees*, by Bob Nelson, as an information source for creative incentive programs.

Service Skills Matrix

SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE & ABILITIES	MANAGERS & SUPERVISORS	EMPLOYEES
HANDLING CUSTOMER INTERACTIONS		
Ability to define customers	X	X
Knowledge of what customers expect	X	X
Skills in providing responsive service to customers	X	X
Knowledge of how behaviors trigger productive and unproductive customer interactions	X	X
Skills in reducing stress in tense customer interactions	X	X
Skills for resolving difficulties with angry customers	X	X
Customer problem-solving skills	X	X
Ability to respond to verbal attacks	X	X
Skills in saying 'no' to customers in a productive way	X	X

Customer Service Skills Matrix (Continued)	MANAGERS & SUPERVISORS	EMPLOYEES
SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE & ABILITIES		
COACHING & MOTIVATING CUSTOMER SERVICE BEHAVIORS		
Ability to create and communicate specific, measurable, customer-focused performance	X	
Ability to establish customer service performance standards for employees	X	
Skills in delivering effective, constructive feedback to employees about their customer service skills	X	
Ability to identify and evaluate performance problems, and to determine how and when to take corrective action	X	
Ability to reinforce desired staff behaviors with customers	X	
MANAGING CUSTOMER SERVICE IMPROVEMENT		
Knowledge of what drives customer “loyalty” in the context of public organizations	X	
Skills in analyzing customer transactions (cycles of service)	X	
Ability to gather, analyze, and respond to customer feedback	X	
Ability to use customer feedback to improve service processes	X	
Ability to establish “service recoveries”	X	
Ability to determine appropriate levels of service delivery empowerment for subordinate employees	X	

Customer Service Skills Matrix (Continued)	MANAGERS & SUPERVISORS	EMPLOYEES
SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE & ABILITIES		
USING CUSTOMER FEEDBACK		
Skills in using focus groups in the context of customer service improvement efforts		X
GATHERING CUSTOMER FEEDBACK		
Skills in developing surveys, interviews, and other methods for obtaining specific, actionable, and timely data		X
Ability to administer a survey and interview processes		X
Ability to analyze and report customer service data		X
Ability to interview customers to obtain feedback		X